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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001560

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/WERNER

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TAGS: PTER PGOV PREL KDEM LE SY IS IR KISL
SUBJECT: MGLE01: NASRALLAH SKETCHES OUT PERMANENT STATE OF
WAR WITH ISRAEL

REF: BEIRUT 1559

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) In separate meetings with the Ambassador, Amin Gemayel and Marwan Hamadeh read aloud their notes from the 5/16 session of the National Dialogue. The participants agreed to disagree on the issue of the presidency, leaving the subject unresolved. On Hizballah's weapons -- the final agenda point -- Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah offered a hardline vision for a potential defense strategy for Lebanon. In Nasrallah's view, Israel has eternal hostile intentions regarding Lebanon. Hizballah, as a tried-and-true force, checks Israeli ambitions more effectively than a traditional army could and currently has northern Israel effectively under its weapons. Because Hizballah rockets could reach Israel's petrochemical plants in the Haifa area, Nasrallah claimed that Hizballah deters Israel through what are in effect WMD. While Hizballah is willing to coordinate broad strategy with the GOL, Hizballah will not surrender its independence in terms of tactical decision making. Other participants listened but will not respond until the 6/8 Dialogue session. End summary.

¶12. (S) Gemayel and Hamadeh (as well as Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri, speaking to the Ambassador by phone) said that they were dismayed but not particularly surprised by Nasrallah's uncompromising stance. They did not know whether Nasrallah was offering an extremist opening salvo, knowing that he would have to back down, or drawing a line in the Lebanese sand. They agreed that the March 14 forces will have to present a coordinated counterattack to Nasrallah when the Dialogue resumes again June 8. While predicting that Michel Aoun will refuse any cooperation, they accepted the Ambassador's request that they try to build bridges to Aoun in order to present a unified position to Nasrallah. (See reftel for Aoun's skepticism on the idea of working with March 14.) End summary.

AGREE TO DISAGREE ON LAHOUD'S FATE

¶13. (C) The Ambassador met with Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh (Druse, allied with Walid Jumblatt) on 5/17 and former Lebanese President Amin Gemayel on 5/18 to discuss the 5/17 session of the National Dialogue both had attended. On the presidency, National Dialogue participants agreed that it was futile for now to continue to discuss the fate of President Emile Lahoud. While there was general acceptance of the idea that he should resign, there

was no consensus on his successor. Without that consensus, Hizballah, Amal, and Michel Aoun all refused to agree on Lahoud's departure. When the participants decided to set aside the presidency question, Nasrallah then tried to close the subject altogether, arguing that Lahoud should be rehabilitated. March 14 participants refused. So, for now, "everyone maintains his own position regarding Lahoud," Hamadeh said; "we've agreed to disagree." "Maybe" the Dialogue will address the subject again, he added.

NASRALLAH SPEAKS, BUT RESPONSES
WILL BE PRESENTED ON JUNE 8

¶4. (S) The rest of the Dialogue session was supposed to be devoted to a discussion on Hizballah's arms, the last subject on the agenda of the Dialogue. Nasrallah monopolized the session, drawing from notes to give a presentation of more than an hour on Hizballah's views about Lebanon's defense. Both Gemayel and Hamadeh were dismayed but not surprised by the hardline, bellicose views Nasrallah expressed. Speaking with the Ambassador by phone, Jumblatt and Hariri also expressed concern with Nasrallah's words. Other participants agreed with Parliament Speaker (and Dialogue chair) Nabih Berri's proposal to postpone any responses until the next session of the National Dialogue, scheduled for June 8.

ISRAEL IS LEBANON'S ETERNAL ENEMY

¶5. (S) In describing the substance of Nasrallah's statement, both Gemayel and Hamadeh read verbatim the notes they had taken at the session. Nasrallah opened by stating that Israel was, is, and always will be Lebanon's enemy.

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Lebanon is in a strategic confrontation with Israel. Nasrallah noted that Hizballah would only discuss seriously the disposition of its weapons after three pre-conditions were fulfilled: Sheba'a Farms is liberated, Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisoners are freed, and the Lebanese have agreed on a national defense strategy. ("In other words, three vetoes," Gemayel said -- "an Israeli veto, a Syrian veto, and a Hizballah veto.") Gemayel and Hamadeh agreed, however, that Nasrallah's subsequent words implied that, even if those three conditions were fulfilled, Hizballah would never agree to voluntary disarmament.

THE HIZBALLAH HISTORY CHANNEL:
RESISTANCE SAVED, AND IS SAVING, LEBANON

¶6. (S) Nasrallah then offered a Hizballah history of the Israeli occupation in Lebanon, the Israeli withdrawal, ongoing Israeli "aggressions" against Lebanon, and so forth. If it weren't for Hizballah's weapons, Israel would still occupy southern Lebanon. If it weren't for Hizballah's weapons, Israel would today be stealing Lebanese resources and lands. Didn't Hizballah protect the Hasbani/Wazzani water sources? Israel has eternal, hostile ambitions against Lebanon that only Hizballah's weapons can check. Northern Israel accounts for half of Israel's economy and a third of its population. The Israelis know that Hizballah could keep rockets flying for at least three months, no matter what Israel does in response. Hizballah rockets -- the number of which is kept secret from all but the top Hizballah leaders -- are essentially weapons of mass destruction, as they can hit Haifa's petrochemical plants. Anticipating questions from his Dialogue colleagues, Nasrallah said that Lebanon must have resistance even when Syria does not, because it is easier to hit Israel's strategic infrastructure from Lebanon rather than Syria.

HIZBALLAH, ARMY -- TWO ESSENTIAL LEGS
OF LEBANESE DEFENSE STRATEGY

¶7. (S) Thus, to keep Israel restrained and off-balance, Lebanon needs Hizballah. Hizballah is a proven, experienced force that is mobile and inexpensive. ("But who's paying?" Gemayel wrote in the margins of his notes, a reminder to himself to ask Nasrallah about Iran.) The Israelis will knock out Lebanese Armed Forces facilities easily, but they did not and cannot stamp out Hizballah, which only has "invisible barracks." There are Hizballah fighters integrated into houses and villages all over the south, and -- unlike the Lebanese state institutions -- not one Hizballah cell has been penetrated by the Mossad. Thus, while Lebanon needs an army, it also, most definitely, needs a "resistance." Hizballah and the LAF are the two essential components of Lebanese security and defense strategy. Hizballah evens the playing field and changes the equation with a more powerful Israeli enemy.

STRATEGIC COORDINATION WITH LAF: MAYBE
BUT HIZBALLAH TO RETAIN TACTICAL FREEDOM

¶8. (S) Nasrallah said that Hizballah would, in the context of an agreed-upon national defense strategy to combat the Israeli aggressors, consider coordination at the strategic level with the LAF. But Hizballah had to maintain freedom of action in terms of tactics. Moreover, it is better for the LAF to have deniability over Hizballah's actions. Relying on an armistice agreement or international guarantees is out of the question, Nasrallah said. Lebanon's Shia, subject to an Israeli occupation for 18 years, will not accept empty words by the international community. In a line that both Hamadeh and Gemayel found particularly ominous (but Michel Aoun accepted -- see reftel), Nasrallah referred a couple of times to "regional conditions" as also necessitating the retention of Hizballah freedom of action.

MARCH 14 PARTICIPANTS TO RESPOND JUNE 8

¶9. (S) Gemayel and Hamadeh both noted that Nasrallah might just be giving an extremist opening salvo, knowing that he will have to negotiate to a more reasonable position once the Dialogue's give-and-take begins. But they worried that he may, in fact, be signaling an Iranian-Syrian red line. They agreed that the March 14 participants in the National Dialogue need to develop a coordinated, strong response for

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the June 8 Dialogue session. The difficulty, Hamadeh said, is that Nasrallah had done a very good job of using history, rhetoric, popularly held views, actual experiences with the Israelis, etc. to build a case that is hard politically (but not factually) to refute -- no one can appear to be siding with the Israelis, Hamadeh said. The March 14 response will have to show why Lebanon does not have to live in a state of constant, razor-edge hostility with the Israelis and that Hizballah is intentionally mixing up a situation when southern Lebanon was occupied with a far different situation today.

¶10. (S) The Ambassador noted that Hizballah was creating the very problem in terms of Israeli overflights that Nasrallah claimed Hizballah's weapons were designed to thwart. The Ambassador urged Hamadeh and Gemayel to find ways to build bridges with Michel Aoun before June 8, so that Nasrallah could not play off differences among Dialogue participants. They agreed to try but thought that Aoun's hatred of March 14 (for its refusal to endorse his presidential bid) overruled any concern he might have about Nasrallah's participation. (See reftel for Aoun's comments.)

FELTMAN